

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2289

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 0017

LIMDIS

EO 1165): GDS

TAGS: PFOR, IS, SY

SUBJECT: TREATMENT OF SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

REF: A. DAMASCUS 2981; B. TEL AVIV 7434

1. OUR COMMENT (PARA 3 REF A) ON SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IS BASED ON CONVERSATIONS EMBOFFS HAVE HAD WITH (A) WESTERN DIPLOMATS CONCERNING THEIR FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCES WITH LOCAL JEWISH COMMUNITY; (B) WITH MEMBERS OF SYRIAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN DAMASCUS WHO HAVE DIRECT CONTACT WITH JEWISH COMMUNITY; AND (C) WITH A FEW MEMBERS OF JEWISH COMMUNITY ITSELF. ALL REPORT THAT JEWS ARE NOW ABLE TO SECURE PERMISSION TO TRAVEL BEYOND IMMEDIATE ENVIRONS OF DAMASCUS, ALEPPO, QAMISHLIA AND OUTSIDE OF SYRIA. TRAVEL AND OTHER RESTRICTIONS HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY RELAXED OVER LAST YEAR OR SO. HERE ARE SEVERAL EXAMPLES TO SUBSTANTIATE WHAT WE HAVE REPORTED.

2. AMBASSADOR OF WEST EUROPEAN COUNTRY TOLD US THAT SYRIAN JEW IN EARLY DECEMBER CAME FOR VISA PRESENTING ONLY HIS IDENTITY CARD AND WAS TOLD HE NEEDED PASSPORT. HE RETURNED FOLLOWING DAY WITH VALID SYRIAN PASSPORT.
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JEWISH MERCHANT IN DAMASCUS HAS TOLD EMBOFF OF PLANS

HE HAS FOR TRIP TO EUROPE IN SPRING. HE HAS ALREADY RECEIVED ASSURANCES FROM SARG THERE WILL BE NO DIFFICULTIES. OTHER JEWISH MERCHANT KNOWN TO EMBASSY MAKES FREQUENT TRIPS TO BEIRUT FOR HIS EXPORT-IMPORT BUSINESS. HE, IN FACT, OWNS HOUSE IN LEBANESE MOUNTAINS AND SPENDS SUMMERS THERE WITH HIS FAMILY. HE SAYS HE HAS EXPERIENCED NO TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS IN RECENT YEARS. OTHER JEWISH MERCHANTS REPORT THEY MAKE FREQUENT TRIPS TO ALEPPO AND OTHER NORTH SYRIAN CITIES FROM DAMASCUS AS ROUTINE PART OF THEIR BUSINESS. WE HAVE HEARD OF JEWISH INDIVIDUALS WITH MEDICAL PROBLEMS REQUIRING HIGHLY SPECIALIZED TREATMENT WHO WERE PERMITTED TRAVEL TO LEBANON FOR SUCH CARE.

3. THESE AND OTHER EXAMPLES WE HAVE HEARD BELIE COMMON ASSUMPTION THAT SYRIAN JEWS ARE SUBJECT BLANKET TRAVEL PROHIBITION. OUR INFORMATION INDICATES THAT SARG DOES WATCH AND, WITH REGARD TO TRAVEL, DOES REQUIRE DEPOSIT OF FUNDS TO ENSURE RETURN OF JEWISH TRAVELERS FROM ABROAD. MERCHANT CONTACTS STATE THAT FOR THEM SUM IS NOT EXORBITANT AND PRESUME THIS IS BECAUSE THEY ARE WELL KNOWN. THEY SAY DEPOSIT PROMPTLY RETURNED ON THEIR RETURN TO SYRIA. THESE CONTACTS ALSO POINT OUT THAT THIS REQUIREMENT TO DEPOSIT FUNDS IS NOT JUST LEVIED AGAINST JEWS BUT AGAINST OTHER SYRIAN GROUPS WHICH SARG BELIEVES MAY NOT INTEND RETURN TO SYRIA, MOST NOTABLY, MILITARY AGE STUDENTS.

4. WE BELIEVE THAT IT NOT IN EITHER THE INTEREST OF LOCAL JEWISH COMMUNITY OR OF USG-SARG RELATIONS TO PUBLICIZE EXAMPLES OF SARG WILLINGNESS PERMIT SPECIFIC MEMBERS OF JEWISH COMMUNITY TO TRAVEL. OUR AWARENESS OF EXTREME SARG SENSITIVITY RE ITS HANDLING ISSUE OF SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY AND OUR BELIEF THAT PUBLICITY WILL NOT HELP FURTHER RELAX RESTRICTIONS ON SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IS WHAT LED IN PART TO CLASSIFYING ORIGINAL MESSAGE AS CONFIDENTIAL-LIMDIS. IN SUMMARY, WE ARE NOT SAYING BY ANY MEANS THAT BEING A JEW IN SYRIA IS A HAPPY LOT. WHAT WE ARE SAYING IS THAT THEIR SITUATION NOW UNDER ASAD IS BETTER THAN WHAT JEWISH COMMUNITY EXPERIENCED UNDER PREVIOUS REGIMES. SYRIAN JEWS THEMSELVES ADVANCE THIS VIEW.

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